

A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON A *WELL-FOUNDED FEAR*: OFFICER STANCETAKING IN A POLITICAL ASYLUM DOCUMENTARY

JENNIFER SHANNAHAN

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

INTRODUCTION

I have to make a decision and I have to live with it. That's what this job is about. You make a decision about people's futures.

(Peter, asylum office)

What's important is the person in front of me and that I do my job as well as I can never forgetting that the person in front of me is a human being.

(Martha Louise, asylum officer)

Widely researched in social sciences, the asylum narrative is crucially the main piece of evidence to prove or disprove an asylum seeker's case. In order to apply for political asylum a refugee must construct a narrative that fits institutional criteria and obeys governmental procedures. The criterion includes that it be a true, personalized account of targeted persecution, categorizable in a larger narrative of political persecution within one of six institutional mandates: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, political opinion (Shuman & Bohmer 2004) or the torture convention (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Form 1-589", p. 5). In this way, the narrative becomes not a reflection or a way of making meaning of life but a necessary key in gaining access.

The asylum officers, the officials who judge the veracity of the asylum narrative, are expected to navigate the political and, often-times, horrific details of each case to reach an objective conclusion which will have major, life-impacting consequences on each asylee. Due to the highly confidential nature of the asylum proceedings in the U.S., very little access has been granted to analyze the micro-context of the interview between claimant and interviewer where this narrative goes under examination. An exception to this is the 2000 American documentary,

Well-Founded Fear, in which directors Michael Robertson and Shari Camerini were allowed to enter two east-coast offices with mics and cameras. The end result is a two-hour film that focuses on 10 claimants and officers as ‘main’ characters, with various other applicants, office-workers, attorneys, and interpreters rounding out the cast. The documentary is unique in that it not only provides viewers with the stories and testimonies of the people trying to secure asylum, but also intimate, post-reflections in which the officers muse on the moral underpinnings of their jobs. The vignettes of officer and asylee interactions serve as crucial windows for examining how institutional figures navigate the expectations of professionalism while registering the distressing details of asylees’ narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Asylum Narrative and Interview

The asylum interview, where the narrative goes under examination (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007; Jacquemet, 2011), has become a site of analysis for multiple intercultural communication issues, primarily in Europe (Maryns & Blommaert, 2001; Blommaert, 2001; Doornbos, 2005; Jacquemet, 2011). With evaluation and judgment of the narrative central to its purpose, the interview has also bred contention in the epistemological (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007) and ontological (Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2013) dynamics at play.

The documentary *Well-Founded Fear* gleans its name from the definition of *refugee* from the 1954 Refugee Convention (UN General Assembly, article 1) and subsequently the measurement used in the USCIS “Form I-589” application for political asylum: “the applicant must display a well-founded fear of persecution” (December 29, 2014, p. 5). The issue of measuring an applicant’s fear falls on the shoulders of the asylum officers who are assigned to judge each case.

After the narrative has been written by claimants in the I-589 application and submitted for review, the asylee will receive an interview date to meet with an asylum officer and participate in an *interview/examination* (Jacquemet, 2011). Here, the narrative will be judged through oral recitation and cross-examination against an existing body of knowledge (Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2013). Once the narrative is judged and the asylee’s identity has been proven or disproven, a recommendation for asylum or a referral to an immigration judge resolves each case and (seemingly) ends the asylum officer’s responsibility with it.

Ontological and Epistemological Underpinnings

Contrary to the social science distinction that narratives are not sole constructions on the part of the teller but co-constructed, deeply contextualized, and mediated between a variety of actors, the narrative within the asylum institution is viewed through a single-teller paradigm in which “the story is treated as a *singular* text, and responsibility for that text is attributed to the asylum seeker” (Blommaert, 2001, p. 24-5, emphasis in original). By ignoring the involvement of multiple parties within the asylum process who contribute to the final verdict of an asylum case, a hefty amount of responsibility is placed on the asylee in the outcome of the case (Blommaert, 2001). Through intercultural communications lens, researchers have been interested in demonstrating how situational factors such as coercive or restrictive formats create stressful environments and impede the deliveries of asylum narratives, resulting in communication failures and rejected asylum pleas (Doornbas, 2005; Bohmer & Shuman, 2007; Jacquemet, 2011, Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2013). Based on this existing body of research, testing for inconsistencies is the asylum institution’s most salient way of establishing veracity.

Testing for inconsistencies is achieved in one of two ways. First, the applicant is drilled off of an institutionally created *script* (Jacquemet, 2011) over small details which test the limits of their knowledge of the event in question (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007) and elicit discrepancies between the written testimony and oral. Second, asylees are prompted to establish denotational references such as temporal, name, and place identifying connections that can be verified as existing outside of the asylees’ experientially storied world through technopolitical devices (Jacquemet, 2013). However, the necessity and feasibility of these elements in establishing credibility remain under dispute (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007; Jacquemet, 2011; Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2013).

Frames Within the Asylum Interview

Perhaps the most paradoxical issue of the political asylum institution is the competing interests of providing refuge and protecting national security (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007). This has resulted in several interesting complications, not least of which is the competition for creating the right sort of asylee identity (Shuman & Bohmer, 2004). In their synthesis of existing research on asylum seeking in the U.S. and U.K., Bohmer and Shuman identify frameworks of

“bogus” asylum seeker, “economic migrant,” and “terror threat” in place for interviewers as a result of their training and experiences. Asylum officers, conversely, are framed within USCIS institutional training literature as neutral decision-makers (see USCIS webpage “Asylum Officer Basic Training Course”). According to the USCIS website, officers are advocates for neither the institution nor the asylum seekers; the asylum interview allows them to “evaluate credibility and determine eligibility” (see AOBTC: “Interview 1: Overview of Nonadversarial Asylum Interview,” 2006, p. 26). USCIS training literature emphasizes that officers create well-planned, nonadversarial interviews so as to be able to “elicit and clarify the information needed to make a determination” (p. 7). In keeping with proper conduct, officers are to “set aside ‘personal baggage’” that may interfere with the adjudication process, and encouraged to display qualities of patience and respect (p. 8) in “creat[ing] an atmosphere in which the applicant can freely express his or her claim” (p. 27).

Despite claims of neutrality, the asylum interview has been shown to foster asymmetrical power interactions (Jacquemet, 2011). As mentioned in the USCIS training and as demonstrated by Bohmer and Shuman’s analysis of asylum interviews (2007), the officer ultimately decides which parts of the asylee’s testimony are valued, brought up, or ignored. My study takes Shuman’s (2006) opinion of *available narrative* and its relationship to *tellability* as the “process of negotiating what gets told and what doesn’t” (150). Available narrative does not refer to a “preexisting body of narratives” from which an applicant can pick to use in the interview for guaranteed success (Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2013, p. 7). Available narratives originate from the experiences of persecution in the individual history of each asylee and are constructed, disputed, or resisted through an interrogation presided over by an asylum officer. Similar to another form of institutionalized talk, the naturalization interview (Baptiste & Seig, 2007), the asylum interview is a high-stakes gatekeeping encounter where the stances that asylees take are to be scrutinized by the interviewer and treated as the basis of a life-impacting decision. Similar to the naturalization officers in Baptiste and Seig’s study, asylum officers often perform conflicting roles as gatekeepers, serving as both a source of assistance and judgement in each case (see AOBTC: “Making the Asylum Decision,” 2002; “Interview 1: Overview of Nonadversarial Asylum Interview,” 2006).

Research Questions

Following Kynsilehto and Puumala's (2013) call not to ignore officers when exploring perspectives in political asylum, this paper will focus on the stances of asylum officers in interaction as presented in the documentary, *Well-Founded Fear*. My analysis aims to demonstrate how officers' expression of stancetaking affects the unfolding interview as the officers determine the credibility of the asylum narrative. Additionally, through post-reflective officer vignettes, I seek to answer how officers maintain their professional identities while managing the internal repercussions of following institutional guidelines of the officer/asylee relationship.

METHODOLOGY

A useful way to examine the tension created between expectations of power and objectivity in the asylum institution is through the use of stance in interaction. According to Du Bois (2007), *stance* is a dynamic interpretation of a social phenomenon enacted by speakers to evaluate and position themselves against a stated or implied focal point in their talk. This is "achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" (p. 163).

In stancetaking, a variety of linguistic devices are used to index stances made, including lexical items (vocabulary), syntactic and grammatical structures such as pronouns, verbs, and tense, as well as phonological features such as intonation and prosody (Kärkkäinen 2007). As a micro-analytic approach, stance is studied at the level of these discrete linguistic units, but the stancetaking itself can stretch over several turns. Using other narrative analysis tools such as narrative sequencing indexicals (Labov and Waletzky 1999) the analysis of this study will focus on the stances within interaction.

As evaluation is inherent in narratives (Labov, 1972; Vásquez, 2007), stance can be most obviously identified in these embedded points of view within the co-construction of asylum narratives in interviews. Stance within asylum interviews, as well as relational and reflective narratives (Vásquez, 2007) between other officers will allow us see how officers perform institutional objectivity as they create a moral understanding of their work.

FINDINGS

Analysis of On-the-Job Practices

Date and fact checking. Establishing denotational frames of reference such as dates and proper names are a common feature of the asylum interview (Doornbos, 2005; Jacquemet 2011, 2015). In the first excerpt, we see Officer Peter interviewing asylee Ana-Marie, who has escaped Romania due to persecution of her religious affiliation. We enter the talk just as she is providing the orientation to her narrative.

Excerpt 1:

- 1 A: My difficulties start after they uh officially knew that I'm a member of the Anglican
 2 church. My husband was uh stopped on the street one night when he came home and he
 3 was severely beaten=
 4 P: =When, when was this?
 5 A: hh (.) uh in November
 6 P: Of '96?
 7 A: Of '96 yes.
 8 P: Ok

Peter immediately responds to the complicating action on lines 2-3 with a question trying to establish temporality. However, due to Ana-Marie's intake of breath and pause in line 5 as she searched for the answer, a disjuncture in normal stancetaking may have taken place. Although the content of the question itself is not abnormal when trying to ascertain the full orientation of a narrative, the nature in which Peter asked, which was abrupt and without sympathetic affect in either tone or body language, does not acknowledge the severity of Ana-Marie's narrative in which her husband has just been beaten. Ana-Marie may have been caught off guard by such an institutionalized response. However, she recovers quickly by supplying the month. Peter continues to probe with a confirmation check in line 6 of the year, which is immediately answered by Ana-Marie. Her parallel syntactic structure (Du Bois, 2014) in line 7 displays an accommodating stance to which Peter can give an affirmative acknowledgement in line 8.

The above excerpt illustrates how predefined roles make the interaction in the asylum interview different from everyday conversation (Doornbos, 2005). The asylum interview is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for asylees such as Ana-Marie, whereas the questions and answers are normalized processes for officers such as Peter (Doornbos 2005, Kynsilehto & Puumala,

2013). In this excerpt Peter is enacting a text-book officer identity by controlling the flow of the narrative and attempting to establish denotational information through question formation. Despite the seemingly bluntness of his question, he is still acting within USCIS guidelines for creating a nonadversarial interview.

In the second excerpt, we see another case of date checking, but with different qualities attached to the officer's decorum. Officer Jim is interviewing asylee Yung, a Chinese dissident, through his interpreter. Because, as viewers, we assume that Jim does not speak Chinese (the documentary provides no evidence to the contrary), we will use the subtitles provided by the filmmakers¹ to analyze the talk in interaction. Any talk spoken in a language other than English and transcribed with English subtitles in the frame will be italicized below.

Excerpt 2

- 9 J: Why did Mr. (.) Yu:ng leave China back in December of '91?
 10 I: *Why did you leave China in December 1991*
 11 Y: *First, I was forced to be sterilized in China and also, in 1989 I joined the student*
 12 *movement I suffered political persecution.*
 13 I: Ok. The first reason is that he's been sterilized in China. The second reason is that in
 14 1989 he joined the student movemen[t and that he's being persecuted
 15 J: [o:ka:y
 16 Ok. He didn't leave until December of '91. What ((looking down at paperwork on his
 17 desk, raises eyebrows)) if anything happened to him the uh four and half years between
 18 he was sterilized ((raises eyebrows)) and when he left China
 19 I: *You were sterilized in '87, but left China in '91. Did anything happen in the four years in*
 20 *between?*

On line 9, Jim is establishing a timeline framework within which Yung will have to structure his narrative. The interpreter appears to relay the intent of Jim's question and Yung accommodates it with an answer that supplies an additional date. A possible cause-effect relationship or temporal order between the sterilization and student movement is not expressed by Yung or his interpreter and in line 17, and Jim makes no overt assessment on it. He does, however, have information about the year of sterilization which would predate the 1989 student involvement. By asking Yung to fill in the 4 ½ year gap that predated his 1991 departure from China, Jim displays a skeptical stance towards the likelihood of Yung's story. On line 17 Jim frames the question in a skeptical manner. "What if anything," shows that Jim is already disbelieving Yung's story and that likely nothing "happened" to him. This is problematic because it means that Jim has already made his assessment and Yung's answer is devalued before he can relay it. The non-adversarial procedure outlined in USCIS training literature states

that officers must “avoid speech that appears to be evaluative or that indicates the asylum officer thinks he or she knows the answer to the question” (AOBTC “Interview 1: Overview of Nonadversarial Asylum Interview,” 2006, p. 8). Because Jim’s evaluation is already made, Yung’s participation in the interview is either unimportant or unnecessary.

Although Jim’s skepticism is apparent by both his raised eyebrows and his language, the interpreter chooses not to translate the words or the sentiment, effectively sterilizing Jim’s stance through her recast of the question in line 20. It would appear then that the interpreter understands that his embedded disbelieving stance is not meant to be taken as professional conduct and shouldn’t be translated to her client.

Metacommentary. Another feature in the discursive organization of the asylum interview are metapragmatic statements (Jacquemet, 2011) “about the implicit social meaning conveyed by speech” (Jacquemet, 2013, p. 201). As we will see, metapragmatic statements can function as metacommentary that the officers use to explain how the interview process works.

In excerpt 3, Officer Gerald is beginning his interview with Farida, an asylum seeker from Algeria, her attorney, and interpreter. Following the USCIS’s protocol on non-adversarial interviewing (“Interview 1: Overview of Nonadversarial Asylum Interview,” 2006), Gerald begins the interview with explicit metacommentary on how the interaction will be structured.

Excerpt 3:

- 21 G: What I want to do is to talk to you for a while about why you’re seeking asylum. I want to
 22 understand your story as best I can. You should feel free to talk to me. Nothing that you say
 23 will go back to your government.
 24 I: *He will listen to your story and to why you are seeking asylum. And he wants you to talk to
 25 him freely, to say what you like.*
 26 F: *To talk now?*
 27 I: *Freely. Say everything you wish.*
 28 F: *I come from a political family my grandfather my father my uncle we are all in politics*
 29 G: What’s she talking about?
 30 I: Oh she saying we are, we come from a family=
 31 G: =Ok I’m going to talk to her about it. Right now I’m just trying to explain what’s going to
 32 happen.

Gerald’s stance in line 21 is providing a welcoming platform for Farida to feel comfortable answering his questions. It is difficult to ascertain why there was confusion as to when and how Farida could speak freely, but Farida’s uptake of Gerald’s invitation shows an accommodating alignment with his asylum officer practices and she launches into the orientation of her narrative.

Because the interpreter does not stop Farida from launching into a narrative, either she is also confused or she is remaining in a passive ‘neutral’ stance so as not to unduly influence the structure of the interaction. In line 29, Gerald makes a request that stops Farida’s ill-timed narrative. In line 31, Gerald provides more metapragmatic explication. Whereas in lines 21-23, Gerald is addressing Farida in the first person through her interpreter, a sign that he is trying to create a convivial atmosphere, in line 31 he addresses the interpreter directly, referring to Farida in the third person and inferring responsibility on the interpreter for Farida’s cooperation. Although Gerald is giving corrective feedback on Farida’s conduct, his tone is calm and mild, indicating that he is keeping with USCIS protocol to “be patient with the applicant” (“Interview 1: Overview of Nonadversarial Asylum Interview,” 2006, p. 8), and he is serving as a text-book example for how an officer should interact in an interview.

In the next excerpt, we meet Officer Martha-Louise interviewing A., an asylum seeker from Nigeria. Like Gerald, Martha-Louise also offers metapragmatic commentary in the form of corrective feedback with similar non-adversarial qualities.

Excerpt 4:

- 33 M: During this period you said you were tortured. What do you mean by tortured?
 34 A: Y’know [((arms gesture upwards))
 35 M: [No ((looks at A., smiling eyes)) I wasn’t [there ((laughing))
 36 A: [See, (2.0) they get a rope[((arms
 37 gesture up and down))
 38 M: [You have to
 39 tell me what they did to you (.) not ((motions hand in half circle)) what they do to other
 40 people ok
 41 A: well I know that’s what I’m telling ok ((arms gesture upwards)) they have a rope hanging
 42 from the ceiling with a kind of a bar. They will put that is your two hands behind and
 43 cross it then drag you up your leg is not gonna touch the ground, so your whole weight
 44 bears on that. Y’know it could be very very painful. Then they stay and ask you questions
 45 y’know trying to see if you can be cracked or broken.
 46 M: And how long would they do that to you?
 47 A: They would do that to you for maybe one hour before release you and say are you ready
 48 to talk
 49 M: They would hold you up there without touching the ground for one hour?
 50 A: Yeah without touching the ground.

Martha Louise offers a good deal of epistemic modeling toward A. When A. begins his explanation with the referential marker “Y’know” on line 22, Martha Louise stops him on line 23, “No I wasn’t there,” an epistemic repair. Her use of “I wasn’t there,” takes A.’s story out of the rhetorical and scaffolds how he should frame the rest of his narrative to meet institutional genre requirements. Similar to Peter’s questions in Excerpt 1, Martha Louise’s insertion would

seem abrupt in the telling of a trauma narrative. However, because the event is institutionally framed to allow these kinds of responses, and because she responds with a friendly laugh followed by sincere eye-contact, Martha Louise can be understood as shepherding A. into the correct framework. His continued use of “you” instead of “I” and Martha-Louise’s ensuing lack of protest shows that she has aligned herself with his storytelling style, perhaps because she performed her institutionally required role by interrupting with the metapragmatic evaluation.

When A. restarts his narrative with the referential marker, “see” and uses the pronoun “they,” Martha Louise interrupts again with the corrective feedback on lines 38-40, “You have to tell me what they did to you, not what they do to other people ok.” This seeming divergence in alignment could be due to A.’s usage of “they get a rope,” which might have been construed as a hypothetical modalization implying a more generalized story of torture. However, A.’s response “that’s what I’m telling” confirms that his usage of “they” is not hypothetical but is emphasizing the systematized nature of torture in the country from which he has fled. His use of “they” denotes real characters that he has possibly encountered, albeit, perhaps at different times. “They get a rope” on line 36 is an evidentiary claim best described as a choral action, a modification of Tannen’s (1989) choral dialogue, in which multiple characters are attributed with doing the same action, possibly many times. In other words, it is something that all torturers in A.’s storied world do to people like A. Martha Louise seems to align herself with this interpretation of his claim by allowing him to continue the story told through choral actions, to which she asks in line 22, “And how long would they do that to you,” both co-telling of the story by asking for temporal clarification and taking up his use of “they” and “you.” The parallelism (Du Bois, 2014) in lines 46 through 49 in which Martha Louise and A. reproduce the modalization of “would,” referring pronoun “they,” and syntactic structure, and A.’s final confirmation “yeah” in line 26, also shows a converging alignment in the co-tellership of this narrative:

- 46 M: **And how long would they do that to you?**
 47 A: **They would do that to you for maybe one hour before release you and again**
 48 M: **They would hold you up there without touching the ground for one hour?**
 49 A: **Yeah without touching the ground.**

The stances Martha Louise and A. have taken up to this point seem directed to the common goal of producing a credible narrative. This negotiation of storytelling aligns with Jacquemet’s

(2011) discussion on the metapragmatic language usage which is expected during asylum interviews.

The final excerpt shows another form of metapragmatic statement given as corrective feedback. We return to Peter interviewing Ana-Marie from the first excerpt:

Excerpt 5:

- 51 A: You asked me when it was the first time
 52 P: Mhmm.
 53 A: They have found out exactly and officially that I'm Anglican.
 54 P: How did they find that out?
 55 A: We'll get to that point [After my bags were ((looks up at Peter))
 56 P: (((indistinguishable talk))
 57 A: Oh? ((smiles)) [After my bags
 58 P: [Listen, this is my interview, not yours, ok?
 59 A: Yes ((smiling, concentrating on Peter))
 60 P: How, how did you... Don't worry ((to Ana-Marie's lawyer off camera)) she's not
 61 antagonizing me
 62 L: Ok, ok
 63 P: Don't worry about it ((quickly to lawyer)) Um, I just want to backtrack a little bit. ((Ana-
 64 Marie nods, presses lips together))

Preceding this talk were several question-answer turns regulated by Peter asking how it was discovered in Romania that she belonged to the Anglican Church. As his questions became more specific, Ana-Marie's demeanor became more exasperated. By line 53, her tone relays irritation as she emphasizes the words "found out exactly...officially...Anglican." In the next turn Peter launches into another question but Ana rejects Peter's stance that his question must be answered in line 55. She is concerned with continuing the sequence of her narrative on her terms. Peter counters this stance by disaligning with her in line 58 "Listen, this is my interview, not yours." Peter decides what stance is possible for Ana-Marie, which in this case must always be accommodating to his questions. If she attempts to diverge, he will reign her back in.

As another example of metapragmatic commentary, the nature of Peter's stance is going further than Gerald's and Martha Louise's corrective feedback in Excerpts 3 and 4. Although Peter and Martha Louise both use the more domineering imperative when giving corrective feedback, "You need to" and "Listen," it's possible to suggest from the overlapping speech in Peter's example that he may not have been remaining patient and nonadversarial with Ana-Marie. Although his tone does not betray any negative affect and he goes on to tell the attorney that Ana-Maria isn't antagonizing him, his stance also lacks the positive signals that Martha Louise shared with A. to reassure him that her stance was friendly. In Excerpt 5, Peter is exerting

his role as dominant participant within the interaction. Jacquemet (2013) describes this as a *metapragmatic attack*; Peter's bluntness, combined with a lack of positive affect found in Martha Louise's example, is a stance move that "unravel[s] the raw fabric of communicative interactions, exposing the disputants' maneuvers as they struggle for control, respect, and interactional dominance" (p. 201). Ana-Marie was intent on completing her story in the fashion she desired, while Peter was motivated by testing the limits of her testimony. A sense of disjuncture in the stancetaking ensues, where in lines 57- 64 Ana-Marie seems both caught off guard by Peter's metapragmatic attack and attempting to regain her cooperative position in the interview.

Providing evidence. Another important feature of officer practice is finding or drawing out evidence from the claimants in order to determine credibility. Jacquemet (2011, 2015) argues that requesting denotational information in the asylum interview is a late-modern, Western centric tactic for establishing credibility. In other words, in the asylum cross-examination context, proper names equate to credibility, or 'knowing,' although their relevance may not seem immediately clear to the person being interviewed (Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2013).

Excerpt 6

- 65 P: One thing I forgot to ask you before and I forgot. Um, what are the sacraments that the
66 Anglican church recognizes?
67 A: Its holy communion [
68 P: [mhmm
69 A: and its holy trinity ((hands thrown up and out, laughing voice))
70 P: In what language was the Anglican service [conducted in
71 ((camera pans to lawyer's face))
72 A: [in English
73 P: in Romania?
74 A: in English
75 P: Who's the head of the Anglican Church?
76 A: ((camera on Ana Maria's face)) (.) The head of the Anglican church in Romani[a
77 P: [overall
78 A: overall (.) It's a bishop, bishop of Gibraltar, he's called. Now he's called Bishop John of
79 Gibraltar.

Ana-Marie's smile and hand gestures in line 32 show that she is, again, partially thrown-off by Peter's questions. His line of questioning, emblematic of the disjointed stancetaking of asylum interviews, is incongruous to the sequence of events she has been attempting to relate since the interview began. Peter needs to establish that Ana-Marie is the faithful Anglican she

has identified as in order to establish the plausibility of her narrative. Additionally, he assumes that a member of the Anglican Church should be able to relay this information instantly from memory. It appears from Ana Marie's pauses that Peter is succeeding in producing an epistemology of ignorance (Shuman & Bohmer, 2007) by pointing out lapses in Ana-Marie's memory, showing what she has forgotten instead of what she knows. However, Ana-Marie seems to recover by line 42 but the scene stops before we as viewers can gauge Peter's evaluation. Peter's line of questioning and decorum falls within the boundaries of institutional requirements and in this excerpt he can be taken once more as a text-book example of how an officer should interact in an interview.

In the next excerpt looking at how officers elicit evidence from asylees, we return to Officer Jim, his interviewee Yung, and Yung's interpreter. In the preceding talk, the camera continually switches between Jim, who often looks irritated and incredulous, to Yung who is becoming more emotional in his story telling. In the following excerpt, the camera begins on Jim who is looking down while writing.

Excerpt 7

- 80 I: The next night around 7 o'clock in the evening, the public security people come (.) They
81 take him away.
- 82 J: Alright, so what happened?((throws hand up, closes eyes and rubs head, avoids looking
83 at Yung or interpreter))
- 84 I: Then what happened?
- 85 Y: After we got to the Shanghai hotel
- 86 I: In a hotel in Shanghai ((looks down at paper))
- 87 Y: One policeman pulled the bed to block the door and slept on it ((Jim rests his head in his
88 hand, writing, raises eyebrows slightly))
- 89 J: mmmm ((Jim looks up briefly at Yung))
- 90 I: Ok ((Jim looks back at paper begins writing))
- 91 Y: The other cop sat across from me
- 92 J: ((head still on hand)) [Ok what's he saying please ((looks up briefly))
- 93 I: Ok, one of the guards was sleeping by the door
- 94 J: Mhm ((rubs forehead with fingertips))
- 95 Y: There were 3 or 4 of them, playing cards [until about 1 am. ((camera to Yung, catches his
96 expression when Jim interrupts))
- 97 J: [Ok what is he saying please? ((agitated voice))
- 98 I: There were four guards. They were playing cards. [until
- 99 J: [Alright [Now,
- 100 I: [1 AM=
- 101 J: = ok, there were four guards ((disbelieving voice))
- 102 I: ((Yung nods slightly)) Ok.
- 103 J: So what happened? ((challenging tone))

Unlike Peter who directs his metapragmatic attack at the claimant, Jim's metapragmatic attacks are directed towards the interpreter. In lines 92 and 97, as he becomes increasingly more focused on the small details of Yung's narrative, Peter appears to grow impatient with the interpreter's speed of translation. In addition to evaluating the interpreter's performance, Jim's imperative commands to "tell me what he's saying" are asserting his dominant role as interviewer. Jim's metapragmatic attacks demonstrate "a strategy of consciously and overtly calling attention to and/or mocking the opponent's performance for the purpose of interactional control" (Jacquemet, 2013, p. 201).

Jim's dismissive behavior towards the claimant in line 82, agitated movement in 94, and tone in line 102 "there were four guards", all denote an impatient if not outright incredulous stance towards each of Yung's claims. In an effort to create a non-adversarial interview in order to put the applicant at ease, officers are instructed to "treat[] the applicant with respect and be[] nonjudgemental" (p. 8) while "maintain[ing] a neutral tone throughout the interview" ("Interview 1: Overview of Nonadversarial Asylum Interview," p. 10). When Jim asks for evidence in line 82 and 104, his tone is neither neutral nor nonjudgemental but challenging. Once again, the above excerpt demonstrates that Jim's interviewing practices are problematic by both institutional and research standards.

As a final example of providing evidence as interview practice, Excerpt 8 offers a unique opportunity to see how officers retell the asylum narrative to a supervisor, effectively reversing their power positions in the interview setting. Whereas in the scene with A., Martha Louise was the gatekeeper and expert assisting A. in co-telling his story, now Martha Louise is the interviewee not only defending the asylee's narrative but also defending her choice to believe the narrative to her institutional superior.

Excerpt 8

- 104 J: The military picked him up¹[still believed that he was a member of some small resistance
 105 M: [mhm
 106 J: organization [and released him. [That's inconsistent (.) with the government of Nigeria.
 107 M: [mhmm [mhmm
 108 J: That's one time. That happened three times and released each time. He not only had a
 109 passport which they didn't confiscate, which is another thing that they do when th[ey
 110 M: [They
 111 couldn't get it

- 112 J: They don't allow dissidents to leave the country especially people that they suspect to
 113 be=
 114 M: =No I understand that but I also I mean (.) ((papers rustling)) I believe what he said that
 115 he got that he got the parole not the parole=
 116 J: =Protocol
 117 M: Protocol officer
 118 J: Which is the member of the government.

The inconsistency within the larger narrative of Nigerian government practices is framed as evidentiary support for James' incredulity. Martha Louise's counters with a divergent alignment "No" followed by her epistemic stances, "I understand," "I mean," and "I believe," in line 32. Interestingly, Martha Louise responds to James' evidentiary claim about being a member of the government with her own hypothetical claim below:

- 119 M: Yeah but you could have members of the government that are friends of yours. You know
 120 everything isn't black and white I mean I'm a member of the government, of this
 121 government.
 122 J: But you don't protest against the government states
 123 M: I would if I thought they were doing something wrong
 124 J: But then you wouldn't work for the government.
 125 M: How do you know?
 126 J: ((laughs)) Let me look through this some more.
 127 M: I mean I'm an American citizen and I don't like a lot of the things the government does
 128 but I think my job is to is to protest and change it and not just either go or to say it's one
 129 way or another.
 130 J: Well that's fine but the fact that he had a passport with an exit stamp and a V1 visa
 131 M: What does the V1 visa have to do with it? He got the exit visa to go and deliver a paper in
 132 California

Within the retelling of A.'s narrative, Martha Louise posits a moral stance as told through a hypothetical narrative. This creates a justification for her 'believing' stance and compels James to reconsider his own. This hypothetical is then interrupted by her hedge "You know," signaling a break from her narrative to give an evaluation. In this case, that evaluation is that "everything isn't black and white" which she then defines with a claim about herself. Framed by the epistemic hedge "I mean," Martha Louise creates a parallelism (Du Bois, 2014) with the character in A.'s story to make an evidentiary claim that his narrative is feasible.

James takes up the co-telling of hypothetical narrative "But then you wouldn't work for the government," to which Martha Louise promptly responds with an epistemic stance "How do you know?" challenging his stance again. This excerpt shows an interesting split in the objects which

Martha Louise and James are referring to, and Martha Louise's perseverance in defending her stance to her superior could show how morally invested she is.

In line 127 James maintains the A.'s narrative's veracity as the stance object. Although Martha Louise evaluates this object with a divergent stance in 128, she is also evoking a stance against a more personal object, the aptitude of Martha Louise as asylum officer and her ability to correctly judge A.'s case. Martha Louise resists James' attempt to close the topic by continuing her evidentiary claim supporting A.'s story and her ability to correctly judge his case with the third level positioning of civic responsibility.

Martha Louise's narrative "I mean I'm an American citizen" is another parallelism with A.'s asylum narrative in which Martha Louise tries to establish credibility. Civic responsibility in her hypothetical story would serve as grounds for torture if her civic responsibility was interpreted as dissidence by an opposing government. She and A. have similar perspectives (hypothetically) and hence his stance is as equally legitimate as hers. "I mean I'm an American citizen" show how her stance is further evolving through the course of this talk through an affective sequence (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen 2012). By employing the affective frame "I don't like a lot of the things the government does," she signals a morality stance defending the institution of political asylum, "but I think my job is to protest and change it," referring to a new object: civic responsibility in the asylum institution. By using herself as the protagonist and creating a parallel between herself and A., Martha Louise has painted herself in the best moral light possible (Ochs, 2004) and challenges James to disagree with her, putting himself in a potentially unmoral position.

James again ignores her bid towards any object other than the veracity of A.'s narrative with the affective stance "Well that's fine," aligning with her moral stance but not giving it authority in this interaction. The topic of civic responsibility is closed, deflecting any more evaluation on that object. James's subsequent "But the fact that he" signals an evidentiary frame, once again indicating his stance of incredulity towards A.'s narrative. Martha Louise's immediate rebuttal "What does the V1 visa have to do with it?" clearly shows the divergence in their alignment toward veracity and what counts as evidentiary proof.

It is not immediately clear from this interaction if Martha Louise is functioning as a textbook example officer in this setting or if she is meandering outside of the bounds of professionalism. On the one hand, she is repeatedly challenging authority through her

stancetaking, which could be considered problematic within institutional hierarchy. However, Martha Louise is also employing the discursive strategies allowable to officers for establishing evidence and the interaction does not appear to be a conflict talk (Jacquemet, 2013), owing in larger part to the absence of any metapragmatic statements or attacks. To continue the examination, let us turn to the second part of my analysis where Martha Louise and the other officers make sense of their own stancetaking in post-reflective vignettes.

Analysis of Off-the-Job Reflections

Although the preceding excerpts have shown the officers to more or less be conducting themselves within the boundaries of professional expectation, this does not automatically preclude them from experiencing any doubt or moral turmoil in understanding their role within the institution. Because the political asylum institution is founded on the need to provide refuge from events such as persecution, genocide, and torture, it should come as no surprise that officers must sort through emotional or moral responses to the evaluations they make on the job. The following vignettes show how each of the officers rectify their interview interaction with their moral understanding of the job.

Officer I: Martha-Louise. Immediately following the scene with her supervisor, James, Martha Louise is seen walking down a hallway running her hand over her hair as her voiceover begins.

133 M: The results of the decisions here are a little more ((laughing voice)) serious than, you
 134 know, crossing the street. Which I guess is partly why it is so incredibly stressful
 135 ((laughing voice)). With another supervisor who didn't see things the same way I did,
 136 who basically my feeling was, didn't believe practically anybody, and his attitude was I
 137 believed everybody. And he may be right, I don't know. But the point is if I could not
 138 understand why he thought this person should be denied asylum, I won't do it.

In a small relational narrative (Vásquez, 2007), Martha-Louise contrasts her previous self's stance against a previous supervisor's stance. Neither character saw eye-to-eye and the previous supervisor even made an overgeneralized stance that Martha Louise was not skeptical of any of her cases. Her epistemic modalization, "And he may be right" shows her current self-doubting her former self's stance. But, as the protagonist in her story (Ochs, 2014), Martha Louise is also framing herself in the best light morally. By the end of her narrative on line 139, she has reached

her coda, which propels her into the present now. Her stance “I won’t do it” says she’s not too lenient, it’s the institution that is too skeptical.

Not only is this segment important for casting asylum officers in a sympathetic light, but it also highlights the moral root of Martha-Louise’s confliction. She is discomforted by the idea of dispensing with referrals that may unfairly impact the lives of asylees. By basing her unease on issues of credibility, she is walking a fine line between upholding institutional law and acting as an advocate for refugee rights. USCIS training literature cautions officers against assuming the role of advocate for the asylee or for the government: “The asylum officer is not an advocate for either side; rather the asylum officer is a neutral decision-maker” (“Interview 1: Overview of Nonadversarial Asylum Interview,” 2006, p. 6). It is not Martha Louise’s place to outright refute her restrictions as an asylum officer, so she seeks the guidance of her superiors but does not give in unless she is totally convinced.

Officer II: Peter. In the next vignette, Peter discusses his decision to deny Ana-Marie’s claim for asylum:

139 P: I can understand the desire to stay here. She could make a much better life for herself
 140 here but that’s not grounds for asylum. A lot of people would like to come here to better
 141 their lives but that’s not grounds for asylum....How many Anglicans ((puts on glasses,
 142 looks directly at screen)) do you know don’t know the archbishop of Canterbury is|the
 143 head of the Anglican Church? And uh how many Anglicans do you know who don’t
 144 know the sacraments of the Anglican Church? If she claims that she went there every
 145 week and took communion.

Through Peter’s reflective stancetaking, Ana-Marie has been positioned as an economic migrant and therefore a fraudulent asylum seeker. Although he can sympathize with her (line 140) and all other immigrants (line 142), he cannot bend the rules of asylum to allow them to stay in the U.S. (line 142). He is sympathetic but ultimately will uphold the interests of the asylum institution above the asylees’.

To illustrate his understanding of Ana-Marie’s fraudulent narrative, Peter poses two rhetorical questions to the camera (lines 142-145). The implied stances are that no Anglican would confuse the head of the church or forget the sacraments. Consequently, Peter finds Ana-Marie’s answers to his questions inconsistent to her identity as a person of Anglican faith who attends church enough to merit persecution. However, Peter’s evaluation of Ana-Marie is later proved to be unfounded. In an epilogue of the film, it is revealed that Ana-Marie was correct in saying that the head of the Anglican Church was the Bishop of Gibraltar. Peter’s vignette can

serve as an example to other asylum officers that although their interview practices may follow procedure, there is still room to err when researching a case. Therefore, having the immigration hearing in place protects both the officers and the asylees from the repercussions of wrong decisions.

Officer III: Jim. Jim's post-reflection is important for both viewers of the film and fellow asylum officers to understand how and why Jim's role as asylum officer has become so negatively affected. In the following excerpt, we see that instead of being negatively affected by all cases, Jim's bias may be contained to a single group.

146 J: With the Chinese cases you just have to go for them in terms of their credibility and
 147 usually you can get them. And I realize that sounds kind of sinister 'gotta get 'em!' but
 148 that's what you gotta do. It's usually not too difficult. They're not too sophisticated.
 149 They're basically a bunch of farmers and factory workers and they've been basically
 150 practicing some story.

Jim positions himself as coming from a higher knowledge-based, epistemic stance than the Chinese farmers and factory workers. They are neither sophisticated nor credible, and can only parrot the stories they have been taught by their coaches. He positions himself and the Chinese cases in a sort of battle of right and wrong. Although there is no terroristic threat from these unsophisticated peasants, they are still trying to cheat a benevolent system and it is his duty to prevent them. Jim then invites another officer into the conversation:

151 J: Come on, get in, he wants this! Tell 'em Ed.
 152 ((camera switches to Ed))
 153 P: How many of them go back and complain to the preparer that their story wasn't [all
 154 E: [No:ne.
 155 P: that good.
 156 E: None because the preparer's got all of the cards. I'm sure the bottom line report or threat
 157 is you give me any trouble I'll report ya to immigration and tell 'em that your whole
 158 claim is bogus and you're gonna be on the next plane back to Beijing, or Fujian, or
 159 wherever it is they come from. And they can't speak the language they don't know
 160 anything about the legal avenues here, so they just go along with it.
 161 J: Yeah but don't you think they probably laugh at us too? Because even when we, you
 162 know, do all this and send them to the judge and the judge deports them, nothing happens
 163 to them. Don't they, I mean, word gets around. They gotta know.

Ed's answer to the producer's question is that none of the Chinese asylees will complain to the people who have allegedly prepared their cases because of an unfair power dynamic. While Ed positions the Chinese asylees as still unsophisticated (they can't speak the language) he also

attributes victimhood to them for being taken advantage of by the preparers. However, Jim's response to Ed's explanation repositions himself within the asylum institution as the victim in this narrative and the Chinese applicants as the instigators. As an implied protagonist in the story, Jim is an exemplary moral character while the Chinese applicants are a threat to the dignity of all officers. Jim evaluates deportation as "nothing," whereas the officer character in the narrative must struggle to continue to be a moral professional and go through all the work of providing a fair case to undeserving frauds who likely laugh at them for their trouble.

Jim's vignette is important for adding to a complex portrait of the asylum officer. As a human being, Jim and others are just as at risk to feeling victimized in the system as their seemingly more vulnerable counterparts, the asylum seekers. The danger in this if allowed to go unchecked is that even though an officer can feel like he is following protocol, his attitudinal stances toward previous cases may negatively affect his professional decorum and impact the decision making process. Awareness could offer Jim the relief he needs from becoming so biased that it interferes with his professionalism.

Officer IV: Gerald. Finally, our last officer, Gerald, rounds out the complex professional identities of the asylum officers in the data. In his post-reflection to the camera, Gerald explains the confliction he feels about his referral of Farida's case:

164 G: When you have a lady, you know, who's had a hard time and she's got little kids and
 165 about to have more little kids and all she's trying to do is be safe, when you deny her the
 166 uh a possibility to be safe regardless of whether you did it for good cause or not, I mean
 167 how can you help but feel bad about it? (.) I feel like shit. ((shaking head)) I just I don't
 168 see, I just didn't see what she's got to be afraid of above and beyond what every poor
 169 soul who lives in Algeria has to be afraid of, which is a lot of, you know, civil strife and
 170 violence and wickedness. But I, I am you know ((shaking head)) as happy as I can be
 171 about the decision. Huh which is not very happy. I don't like making such decisions.
 172 Turn that damn thing off ((gestures to camera))

Gerald's confliction is tangible in the affective language he uses. Farida has had a "hard time," and her situation is made more vulnerable by the children she must protect, including the twins she is currently pregnant with. Although Gerald can say that he grounded his epistemic decision in "good cause" he is still negatively and emotionally affected by the event. In fact, he does not like having to make such decisions and frames his evaluation of Farida's case in terms of affect (line 172), feeling "as happy" as he can about denying her claim on institutional merit despite his belief that Algeria is a dangerous place for her and her family.

Gerald represents, perhaps, the documentary's most ideal casting choice for the role of asylum officer. Like Peter, he grounds his decisions in evidentiary and epistemologically founded stances. Unlike Jim, he is not so negatively affected by previous cases as to appear "jaded" or "cynical" towards his future cases. Like Martha Louise he feels driven to provide fair and just consideration for the asylees. However, unlike Jim, he is not so impacted by his experiences as to let his moral stances get in the way of fulfilling his obligations to the neutral officer role. And unlike Peter, (as far as the viewers know) Jim's decision about Farida was not overturned, indicating there was no mistake in his evaluation. He provides an example to asylum officers that even if you are doing your job correctly and can feel (institutionally) justified in making your decision, it is still understandable to feel moral turmoil over the professional boundaries of your job.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the preceding analyses was to highlight that in order for asylum officers to do their job, they must be able to rectify their interaction in the interviews with inner feelings on the decisions they made. By framing their interactions within their understanding of the professional expectations of the jobs, they were overall able to cast themselves as morally correct asylum officers. However, analysis of their interview-practices showed that they still struggle within their professional boundaries. In the table below, we can see the relationship between their institutional decorum and moral identities as officers.

Table 1

Relationship Between Institutional Decorum and Moral Identities As Officers

Officer	Interview 'officer practices' stance	Reflective 'officer practices' stance
Martha Louise	Nonadversarial + advocate = mostly professional	Skeptical of institution = Morally bound to protect asylee interests first
Peter	Mostly nonadversarial + skeptical= professional	Skeptical of asylees = Morally bound to protect institution interests first
Jim	Adversarial + skeptical = somewhat professional	Biased against Chinese asylees = Morally bound to protect the institution from asylees
Gerald	Nonadversarial + skeptical= professional	Skeptical but empathetic towards asylees = Morally bound to protect institution first

IMPLICATIONS

Based on prior research demonstrating how the asylum narrative is discursively organized through the asylum officer's asymmetrical power interactions, this study explored the impact of officer interview-practices on the unfolding sequence of asylum interviews. It offered a unique perspective by analyzing the officers' own sense-making of their interactions, showing how their moral justifications are not always in alignment with institutional guidelines.

Fifteen years after the making of *Well-Founded Fear*, a useful next step would be to carry on the work started in the film in empirically grounded studies which audio-record U.S. asylum interviews and the post-reflections of the officers and asylees afterwards. Updated transcripts and analysis of stance from recent interviews could more accurately reflect current sentiments in not just two, but all six of the asylum offices in the U.S. These studies would make useful training tools for future asylum officers while also informing the understandings of the political asylum process in such a way that could be applied on a global scale.

ENDNOTES

¹ Filmmakers' report on translation of languages: "For every subtitle in the film, at least three different translators have gone over the footage to do literal translations, then move those into more standard English. The subtitles themselves are written from those perfected transcripts, using an old BBC formula that makes them optimally readable" (see www.pbs.org/pov/archive/wellfoundedfear/frameset.php3?section=yourquestions for more)

REFERENCES

- Asylum Division Training Programs*. (2012, March 5). Retrieved March 26, 2015, from <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/asylum/asylum-division-training-programs>
- Baptiste (Winn), M. C., & Seig, M. T. (2007). Training the guardians of America's gate: Discourse-based lessons from naturalization interviews. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, 1919–1941.
- Blommaert, J. (2001). Investigating narrative inequality: African asylum seekers' stories in Belgium. *Discourse & Society*, 12(4), 413-449.
- Bohmer, C., & Shuman, A. (2007). Producing epistemologies of ignorance in the political asylum application process. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 14(5), 603-629.
- Camerini, S. (Producer) & Robertson, M. (Director) (2000). *Well-founded fear* [Motion Picture]. USA: The Epidavros Project
- Doornbos, N. (2005). On being heard in asylum cases: Evidentiary assessment through asylum interviews. In G. Noll (ed.) *Proof: Evidentiary assessment and credibility in asylum procedures* (pp. 103-122). Martinus Nijhoff.
- Du Bois, J. W. (2007). The stance triangle. In R. Englebretson (Ed.), *Stancetaking in discourse: Subjectivity, evaluation, interaction* (pp. 139-182). John Benjamins.
- Du Bois, J. W. & Kärkkäinen, E. (2012). Taking a stance on emotion: affect, sequence, and intersubjectivity in dialogic interaction. *Text & Talk*, 32(4), 433-451. doi:10.1515/text-2012-0021
- Du Bois, J. W. (2014). Towards a dialogic syntax. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 25(3), 359–410.
- Jacquemet, M. (2011). Crosstalk 2.0: asylum and communicative breakdowns. *Text & Talk - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse & Communication Studies*, 31(4), 475-497. doi:10.1515/text.2011.023
- Jacquemet, M. (2013). Transidioma and Asylum: Gumperz's Legacy in Intercultural Institutional Talk. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 23, 199–212. doi: 10.1111/jola.12027
- Jacquemet, M. (2015). Asylum and superdiversity: The search for denotational accuracy during asylum hearings. *Language & Communication*, 1-10. doi: 10.1016/j.langcom.2014.10.016

- Kärkkäinen, E. (2007). The role of I guess in conversational stancetaking. In R. Englebretson (Ed.), *Stancetaking in discourse: Subjectivity, evaluation, interaction* (pp.183-219). John Benjamins.
- Kynsilehto, A., & Puumala, E. (2013). Persecution as Experience and Knowledge. The Ontological Dynamics of Asylum Interviews. *International Studies Perspectives*, 1-17.
- Labov, W. (1972). The transformation of experience in narrative syntax. In W. Labov (Ed.) *Language in the inner city* (pp. 354–96). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.
- Labov, W. & Waletzky, J. (1997). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 71, 3-38.
- Lampropoulou, S., & Myers, G. (2012). Stance-taking in interviews from the qualidata archive. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 14(1). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1813/3468>
- Maryns, K., & Blommaert, J. (2001). Stylistic and thematic shifting as a narrative resource: Assessing asylum seekers' repertoires. *Multilingua*, 20(1), 61-84.
- Ochs, E. (2004). Narrative lessons. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (pp. 269-289). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Shuman, A., & Bohmer, C. (2004). Representing trauma: Political asylum narrative. *Journal of American Folklore*, 117(466), 394-414
- Tannen, D. 1989. "Oh talking voice that is so sweet": Constructing dialogue in conversation. Ch. 4 in *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse*. Cambridge UP.
- UN General Assembly. (1951, July 28). *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, United Nations, Treaty Series, 189, p. 137, Retrieved March 30, 2015, from: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3be01b964.html>
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2014). Form I-589 Application for asylum and for withholding of removal.

APPENDIX

Transcription symbols:

(()) metalinguistic communication/visual cues

[overlapping

? Questioning voice

= latching

___ emphasized speech

: extended vowel